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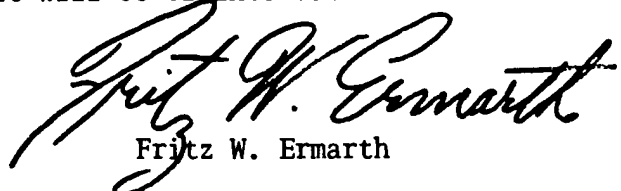
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MEMORANDUM FOR: National Foreign Intelligence Board Principals

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth
National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

SUBJECT: Conference on Political and Social Discontent in USSR

On 29 and 30 March, my office held a conference of US academics, Soviet emigres, and government officials to discuss the significance of political and social discontent in the USSR. I take pleasure in sending you the summation of conference proceedings and hope it will be of interest and use to you.


Fritz W. Ermarth

cc: Mark Palmer
Amb. Jack Matlock
Walt Raymond
Dr. Fred Ikle
Jeremy Azrael
Willis Brooks

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CONFERENCE ON POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DISCONTENT IN THE USSR

29-30 March 1984

1. The NIC-sponsored conference on the significance of political and social discontent in the USSR, held [redacted] on 29-30 March, proved to be a very stimulating exchange of ideas on this important subject. In addition to about 25 government analysts and officials, nine participants from the academic world attended:

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2. The primary purpose of the conference was to examine the extent to which domestic pressures on the Soviet leadership (many of which have deep roots in the Russian past and have been present throughout the history of the Soviet state) are hampering the Soviet system's ability to function effectively and to consider whether or not internal problems over the coming decade may cause the regime to modify its policies and priorities substantially. As was to be expected in so ambitious an undertaking, no definitive answer to this question emerged. Nevertheless, substantial agreement was reached on a number of important issues related to the problem, especially during the final wrap-up session.

- A. Trends over the past decade. There was a consensus that in recent years conditions giving rise to popular and elite discontent have grown stronger while regime instruments for maintaining internal stability and motivating the workforce have grown weaker. The participants disagreed about the degree of change but not about the direction; no one argued that the internal problems confronting the regime had diminished.

(1) Several props to the system have weakened somewhat.

- a. The economic slowdown has made it difficult for the regime to provide the incremental improvements in the standard of living that the population had come to expect in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev years.
- b. Shrinking opportunities for upward social mobility and the hardening of class lines have contributed to a loss of faith among many in their ability to improve their material circumstances through individual effort.
- c. Ideology is virtually dead as a mobilizing force.
- d. The regime no longer has a complete monopoly of information flow. Soviet citizens today have greater access to information from abroad and from non-official sources in the USSR than ever before.
- e. The population is better equipped to evaluate regime propaganda critically because the educational level of Soviet society is higher than ever before. This means that various public issues are potentially of concern not only to the intelligentsia but to broad segments of society. The impetus for innovation and system change can therefore emanate from a much greater variety of places than before.
- f. There has been a palpable decline in the level of fear, suggesting that police terror has lost some of its credibility as a means of social control.
- g. More areas of life have slipped beyond the regime's regulation (e.g., labor mobility, alternative marketplace offered by the "second economy").
- h. The regime's hyping of the threat of nuclear war has backfired by raising popular fears beyond the point desired, which has forced the leadership to provide new reassurances.
- i. Growing public awareness of elite privileges and official abuses of power--most vividly exposed by the anti-corruption campaign--have eroded the population's respect for law and authority somewhat.

- (2) Partly as a consequence of these developments, during the past decade or so the mood of the population has changed. The average citizen has become less believing and less pliable, more pessimistic and more cynical. These attitudes are manifested in a number of related phenomena.
 - a. A decline in collective consciousness and a trend toward privatization and social escapism.
 - b. An increase in hedonism, material acquisitiveness and the pursuit of individual gain.
 - c. An infatuation with Western material goods, fashions, culture.
 - d. The proliferation of subcultures that are not officially sanctioned and to a limited degree of alternative belief systems (e.g., religion).
 - e. An increase in alcoholism.
 - f. The burgeoning of emigration campaigns among disaffected national and religious minorities (Germans and Pentecostals, as well as Jews).
 - g. Some increase in sporadic unrest and the emergence of terrorism on a very small scale.
 - h. An increase in pacifism and efforts to evade military service among young people.
- (3) There are also indications of a shift in the attitudes and behaviour of Soviet elites.
 - a. Corruption has grown at all levels of officialdom.
 - b. Elites today exhibit a lower sense of social purpose than in the past, a weaker commitment to serving the party or the country as opposed to their bureaucratic and especially their private interests.
 - c. The elite's vision of the Soviet future has become gloomier, and its confidence in the regime's ability to deal with the country's problems has declined.
 - d. Events in Poland over the last few years have heightened Soviet elite apprehension about the popular mood at home.
 - e. Elite defections to the West have increased greatly.
 - f. Increased competition for privilege and disagreement about policy among different elements of the elite is creating the possibility that counter-elites may emerge--along functional, insitutional, generational, or ethnic lines.

- B. Residual regime strengths. Despite increasing tensions between the state and society and within the elite itself, the participants agreed that there are strong forces working in favor of policy continuity and regime cohesion.
- (1) The regime's traditional instruments of control and mobilization (e.g., censorship, police repression, propaganda), although somewhat less effective than in the past, are still powerful weapons.
 - (2) Some features of contemporary Soviet life that may have "negative" consequences over time--by eroding the regime's authority and reducing economic performance--may serve some "positive" functions in the short run. Up to a point, corruption may pacify elites by effectively buying them off. Religion, the black market, and alcoholism may serve as escape valves that channel popular frustrations into non-political activities.
 - (3) Many citizens, especially of the older generation, retain a high degree of attachment to dominant values of the political culture and place a higher premium on personal security and public order than on civil liberties or political freedom.
 - (4) Superpower patriotism is a source of support for the regime.
 - (5) Russian nationalism is growing stronger. Since many Russian nationalists in the cultural intelligentsia oppose Marxism-Leninism as an alien Western ideology, some participants believed that the strengthening of nationalist sentiment could pose a threat to the regime, but other participants believed that at least on the popular level nationalism objectively serves the regime's interests and that the regime is successfully manipulating nationalist symbols to associate itself with Russian national identity.
 - (6) Traditional Russian habits and psychology incline the population to be passive in dealing with political authority. The average man is politically alienated but not politically assertive. And the population has demonstrated a high level of endurance of material deprivation.
 - (7) Dissent is fragmented and lacking in infrastructure. There is no national labor movement or church that could serve as a unifying center for disgruntled elements. Class divisions have prevented cooperation between dissident intellectuals and workers. Ethnic divisions have also impeded concerted protest. The authorities have been very successful in sealing off strikes and preventing their spread.

- (8) The political leadership is isolated and to some extent insulated from popular demands felt by officials at lower levels and may consequently be less inclined to recognize a need for changes.

C. Impact of Societal Pressures on the Regime. All participants agreed that the regime has never been able to ignore public opinion altogether in shaping policy and that the role of public opinion today is growing more important in influencing leadership decisionmaking than in the past. But the participants disagreed about the degree of influence that pressure from below would have in future policy deliberations, and no consensus emerged about the likely direction or dimensions of change that such pressure would produce.

- (1) At least two participants believed that Soviet internal problems were mounting to the point of producing radical change--either by bringing about unacceptable economic decline and political instability, or more likely by forcing dramatic policy or structural changes from above in order to avert such disaster. Most other attendees, however, either flatly disbelieved or doubted that such extreme developments were in the offing, at least not for the foreseeable future.
- (2) Short of producing such a systemic crisis, however, it was recognized that the level of popular discontent has a considerable effect on how well the system performs. Low public morale has an adverse effect on labor productivity and at least to some degree on military effectiveness.
- (3) The leadership consequently is sensitive and responsive to some degree to the mood of the population. The leadership, for example, has demonstrated--through the food program, massive grain imports, and concessions to striking workers--that it sees a need to satisfy consumer demand at a certain minimum level and is prepared to pay a significant price to do so by diverting resources from other distressed sectors of the economy.
- (4) In considering alternative Soviet strategies for dealing with domestic problems, most participants thought it unlikely that the regime would embrace fundamental economic reform, but they also rejected the other polar option--a lurch toward full-scale repression and the emergence of a police or military-dominated leadership. In fact, there was no consensus about whether increased societal discontent would impel movement toward reform or toward reaction.

D. Impact of external developments on Soviet society. There was a general recognition that both developments in Eastern Europe and in the West had a significant bearing on the evolution of popular and elite attitudes in the USSR and that this influence gave foreign governments some degree of leverage--at least indirectly--over the Soviet regime.

- (1) Emphasis was placed on the critical role that Western radio broadcasting has played in enabling the Soviet population to compare its lot with that of other peoples and in fostering the emergence of a counter-culture in the USSR through the dissemination of dissident and emigre ideas. There is now a mass audience for information and publications coming in from the West. Western communications should consequently be targeted to address the concerns not only of the intelligentsia but of broader elements of society.
 - (2) Some participants believed that a carefully coordinated Western effort to link trade concessions to Soviet human rights performance could produce some relaxation.
 - (3) The crucial importance of Eastern Europe in shaping Soviet elite and public opinion received much attention. Western radios should not make comparisons between Soviet and Western standards of living. Rather they should factually describe conditions in Eastern Europe, which Soviet citizens use as a base of comparison. They should also give extensive coverage to reform movements in Eastern Europe, since reforms in Eastern Europe provide a Communist model for change and therefore have the effect of legitimizing reform proposals in the USSR.
 - (4) If the USSR suffered a serious military defeat abroad (e.g., a bungled intervention in Iran), or if a perception grew within the USSR that the country was slipping as a world power, this could cause erosion in the population's acceptance of the regime.
3. The visiting professors made several suggestions for organizing our future work in this area.
- A. To apply more resources to the exploitation of open source literature. This is especially important today.
 - (1) In contrast to the Khrushchev period, policy debate is more esoteric and can be followed only by close attention to specialized literature and belles-lettres.
 - (2) Society has become increasingly literate. Soviet publications (below the Pravda and Izvestiya levels) must address society's interests if they are to retain readers, and are therefore more revealing of what is really happening in society.
 - B. To undertake a study of alternative futures. Right now Western policymakers instinctively tend to prefer the status quo because of the instability and ambiguity inherent in change. Having a better idea of the parameters of change will better enable them to assess events in the USSR and possibly to influence them.

- C. To have brainstorming sessions examining contingencies that could produce radical internal change in the USSR and to weigh the probability of each occurring.

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